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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MANILA 000563

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PREL PGOV PHUM RP
SUBJECT: BRUTAL MURDER INVESTIGATED AS EXTRAJUDICIAL KILLING

Classified By: Ambassador Kristie A. Kenney, Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: The brutal murder of a young school teacher has spurred the Philippine government and human rights groups to investigate whether military or law enforcement members were involved in the crime. Rebelyn Pitao, the 20-year-old daughter of New People's Army (NPA) insurgent leader Leoncio Pitao (a.k.a. "Commander Parago") was found murdered March 5 in Mindanao's Davao del Norte province after she was reportedly abducted and tortured by armed men. Her father has blamed the Philippine military and the Arroyo administration for the murder, and named 11 soldiers he alleges were involved in his daughter's murder. In a private meeting with the Ambassador, Secretary of National Defense Gilberto Teodoro and Philippine Armed Forces (AFP) Chief of Staff General Alexander Yano expressed revulsion at the murder, and underscored their resolve to assist law enforcement authorities in conducting a thorough investigation of the crime and bringing the perpetrators to justice. President Arroyo instructed all relevant government agencies to immediately undertake a full investigation of the murder. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (SBU) Twenty-year-old Rebelyn Pitao was reportedly traveling to her home in the outskirts of Davao City in eastern Mindanao the evening of March 4, when she was abducted by unidentified assailants in a van. According to witnesses, the van pulled in front of the motorcycle-sidecar taxi in which she was riding, blocking its path, and two to four armed men forced her into the van. The motorcycle-taxi driver told police that Pitao called for help, but one of the kidnappers pointed a gun at him and told him not to move. Pitao's body was discovered the next day in an irrigation canal in the town of Carmen, approximately thirty kilometers north of Davao City; the corpse showed signs that she had been stabbed, tortured, and possibly sexually assaulted.

LONG-STANDING ENMITY

¶3. (SBU) Pitao's father, a high-ranking insurgent leader of the New People's Army (NPA), claimed in a public statement that that an investigation conducted by the New People's Army (the military wing of the Communist Party of the Philippines) identified 11 soldiers who were involved in his daughter's murder. He claims that the 11 are widely known to have been involved in the killing of militant leaders in the past, and that the van used in his daughter's abduction was seen parked at a military safe house in Carmen, Davao del Norte. He provided no evidence specifically linking any of the 11 to the murder, but vowed to avenge his daughter's death. Leoncio joined the NPA in 1978, and has been accused by the military of committing various attacks, including the 1999 kidnapping of two Philippine armed forces (AFP) officers and a 2007 assault on the Davao Penal Colony armory in which he allegedly led 30 fighters in a raid that captured over 100 firearms and thousands of rounds of ammunition. He is also suspected of leading attacks on several police stations in Davao del Norte. Leoncio blames the AFP for the 2008 kidnapping and murder of his brother, Danilo, and claims that

his son, Ryan, joined him in the NPA and went into hiding after being allegedly hounded and nearly stabbed by military agents in 2005.

14. (SBU) The Philippine government denies any involvement in the killing, and President Arroyo has ordered all relevant government agencies to immediately undertake a full investigation of the murder. General Ferrer, Chief of the AFP's Eastern Mindanao Command, said that he will cooperate fully with the investigation, and asked that the media and public not rush to judgment against the military. The commander of the AFP's 10th Infantry Division, Major General Reynaldo Mapagu, said in a press conference that while his command may be suspected because it has been searching for Leoncio for years, the army would not resort to such a personal, familial level of reprisal. However, General Mapagu nonetheless ordered two of the soldiers accused by Leoncio to be restricted to their barracks, and said he would make them available to the Philippine National Police and other investigative bodies as required. It remained unclear on what basis Mapagu had chosen these two soldiers, rather than the others, to be confined to barracks.

FULL MILITARY COOPERATION PLEDGED

15. (C) In a March 12 meeting, AFP Chief of Staff General Alexander Yano and Secretary of National Defense Gilberto Teodoro told the Ambassador that they were horrified by the murder and were eager to find out whether any elements of the AFP were involved. The Secretary promised that the military would cooperate fully in the investigation and that he wants

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to see it move forward with due process and within the proper legal framework. The senior leadership of the AFP are clearly troubled by Pitao's murder and the allegations of AFP involvement. While it is possible that rogue AFP elements in Mindanao may have played a role as the family and various leftist organizations claim, other perpetrators cannot be ruled out. Clan feuds, personal disputes, intra-NPA rivalries, and criminal elements are often responsible for such gruesome crimes in the Philippines. As AFP Civil Relations Service chief Brigadier General Pangilinan pointed out at a press conference, "There are a thousand-and-one groups that are angry at (Commander) Parago." Post will continue to monitor developments in the case closely, and report as appropriate.

KENNEY